

Collective wisdom

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

"Wikipedia is the best thing ever. Anyone in the world can write anything they want about any subject, so you know you're getting the best possible information."

So proclaimed Michael Scott, the hopelessly clueless boss played by Steve Carrell, in an episode of "The Office." As it happened, on Aug. 19, the New York Times revealed some of the problems that have occurred with Wikipedia when anybody in the world can write anything he wants about any subject.

For those who came late to the revolution, Wikipedia is a free online encyclopedia offering what's known as "open source" material. That means you not only can look stuff up, but you also can change what other people have written and add your own entries. Founded just six years ago by a former futures trader named Jimmy Wales, Wikipedia now dwarfs any other encyclopedia, with more than 5.3 million articles (nearly 2 million in English) written by 75,000 contributors in more than in 100 languages.

Wikipedia is a fascinating experiment in what behavioral scientists call "the wisdom of the masses": Given a large enough and diverse enough group of people operating with the right kind of independence and autonomy, crowds make better decisions than individuals. The theory behind Wikipedia is that given enough time, biases will balance out, errors will be caught and a form of collective truth will emerge.

The problem is that, by definition, Wikipedia is always a work in progress, and the question of who wrote what - and with what motive - has been difficult to determine. An editor at Encyclopedia Britannica once compared it to a public toilet seat, in that you never know who used it last.

That has changed.

Wired News reported recently that Virgil Griffith, a 24-year-old cognitive scientist at Santa Fe Institute in New Mexico, has created a Web site called wikiscanner.virgil.gr, that makes it much easier to trace changes made to Wikipedia text. The site cross-references editing changes with the computer network on which the change originated. This is not particularly helpful if the change was made by an individual user on a large public network, but it looks like it could cut down on corporations using Wikipedia as a tool for image-molding, marketing and public relations.

For example, Wikiscanner revealed that last year, someone at PepsiCo, Inc., edited the Wikipedia entry on Pepsi-Cola, deleting paragraphs that claimed the cola was bad for consumers' health. Similarly, a change to the entry for Sea World amusement parks - substituting "killer whales" for "orcas" - was traced to a computer in the network of Anheuser-Busch Inc., Sea World's parent company. Other companies that have edited

Wikipedia entries include Wal-Mart, ExxonMobil and Diebold.

"The yield, in terms of public relations disasters, is about what I expected," Wikiscanner inventor Griffith told The Times. (The newspaper's own network was found to have been the source of unflattering edits in entries about President George W. Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.)

Wales, the founder of Wikipedia, said changes were under consideration to put registered would-be editors on notice that their Internet protocol addresses were being recorded.

Our emotions about all this are mixed. We're in the business of offering opinions in a public forum, and our institution puts its name at the top of every page. But having spent our career (at the mercy of vicious, tone-deaf) being nurtured by careful, precise editors, we know the (pain of seeing well-wrought prose mangled into unreadable pap) satisfaction that comes from collegial collaboration. (Phooey on) Hurrah for collective wisdom.

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